They Don’t Believe It Either.

The Gaza Genocide as Ideological Performance

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[This is the longer version of an essay that appeared in Quillette yesterday]

I.

During a public address in October 2023, as Israel was preparing to launch its grou invasion of the Gaza Strip, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu quoted a ve from the Bible that would echo through countless NGO reports, and would feature prominently in South Africa’s case against Israel at the International Court of Justi (ICJ) in The Hague: “Remember what Amalek has done to you.” To those uninitiate Biblical mythology, the phrase may not sound particularly ominous, but Israel’s crit knew better. In the Bible, the people of Amalek are the ancient foes of the Israelite and in the book of Samuel, Yahweh commands King Saul to “smite” the Amalekite leaving no one alive—not even women and children.

The Israelites fighting Amalek after the ambush during their flight from Egypt (Exodus 17) - Phillip Medhurst Collection

One snag in this Biblical interpretation is that Netanyahu was quoting from the Bo of Deuteronomy, which recounts a (mythical) tale from centuries earlier. As the Israelites fled Egypt, they were ambushed from the rear by the Amalekites. Followi this treacherous attack, Yahweh tells the Israelites: “Remember what the Amalekite did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and w out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind.” Perha Netanyahu was simply reaching for a cultural reference that would resonate with hi audience, still reeling from the horrific events of 7 Oct, and found in Deuteronomy story that was poignant in its resemblance?

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But Israel’s critics were not satisfied by this explanation. “Amalek” could not possil refer to Hamas, they reasoned, because Hamas is an organization, not a people like Amalekites. Therefore, when Netanyahu spoke about “Amalek,” he clearly implied t Palestinians as a whole. And since the Amalekites are being smitten elsewhere in tl Bible, the obvious inference is that Netanyahu was calling for the annihilation of th Palestinians. Put two and two together, and “remember Amalek” becomes a dog whistle for genocide.

Before we get bogged down in more Bible exegesis, let’s back up for a moment. Just few hundred meters from the ICJ, there is a memorial commemorating the Holocau It bears a bronze plaque, inscribed in Dutch and Hebrew with the same verse Netanyahu quoted: “Remember what Amalek has done to you. Don’t forget.” This ti it cites the correct source: Deuteronomy 25:17–19.

The Holocaust memorial in The Hague.

The infamous Amalek verse from Deuteronomy, in Dutch and in Hebrew, in The Hague.

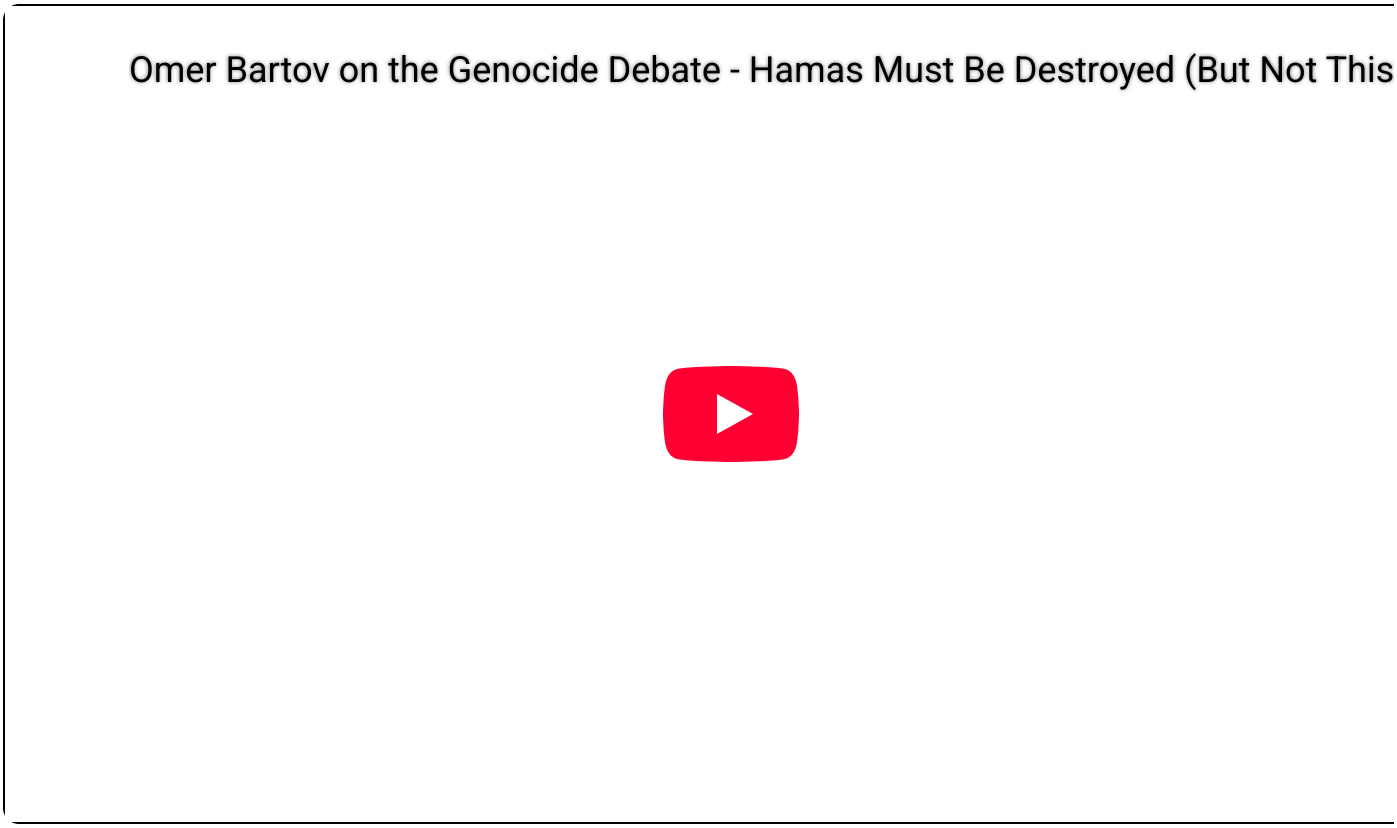
If Israel’s critics had bothered to check, they would have found the same verse at th entrance of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem.

It is a well-established motif in Jewish culture, symbolizing the duty to record and remember the persecutions that Jews suffered at the hands of mobs and regimes throughout history. By the critics' logic, the monument in The Hague incites genoc against the German people (not against the Nazis, who were just a party and not an ethnic group). I wonder if the German ambassador to the Netherlands has already expressed his dismay at this open genocidal incitement?

These facts about the history and meaning of the Amalek verse are easily verifiable and they were pointed out early on in the Gaza War (by Yair Rosenberg) when accusations about Netanyahu's use of allegedly genocidal language first surfaced. A yet, newspapers and NGOs have kept repeating this inflammatory canard without e issuing a correction.

There are countless examples of similar distortions. In an impromptu speech delive days after 7 October, former defense minister Yoav Gallant told his soldiers that "G

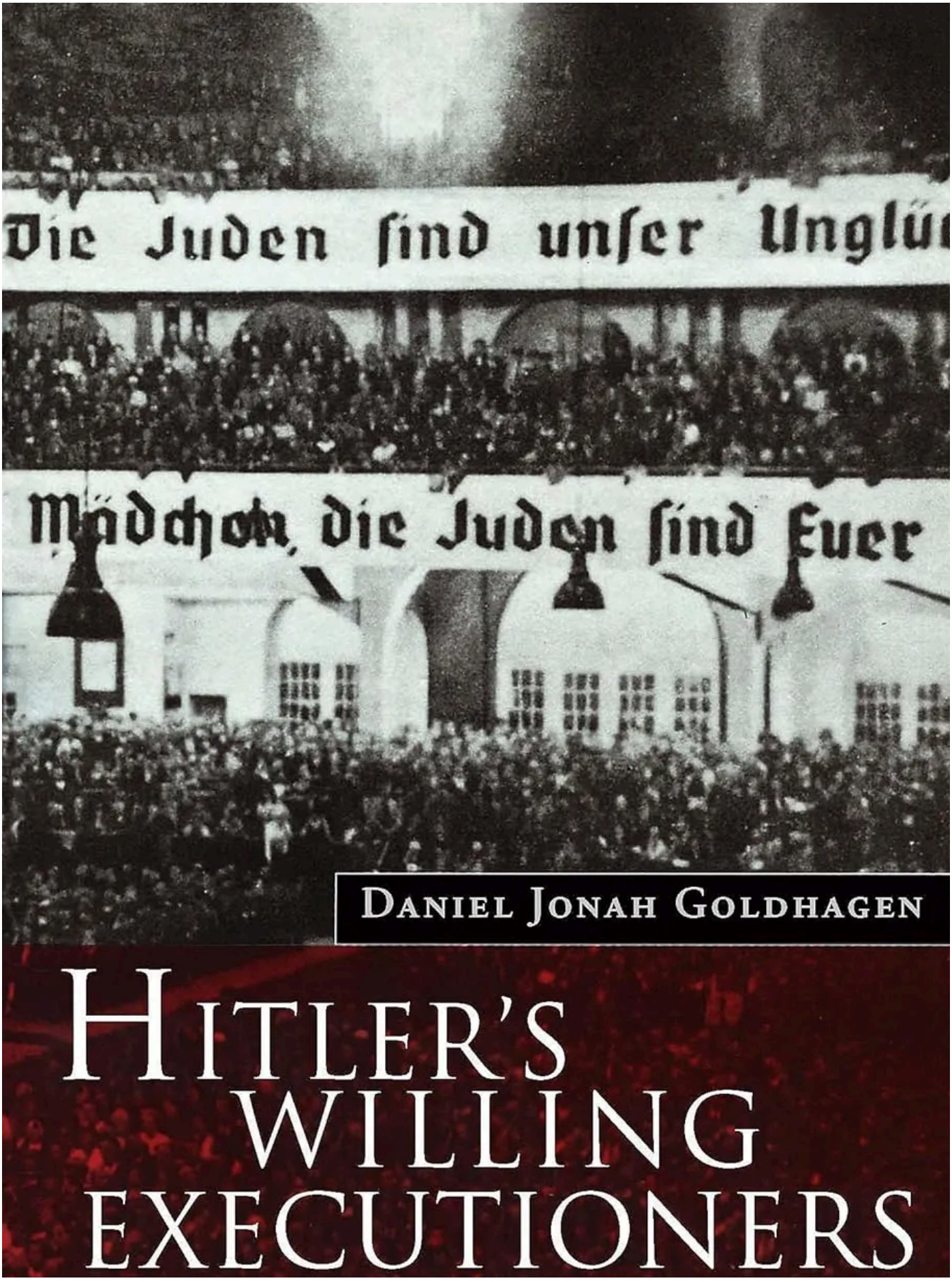
will not return to what it was before. There will be no Hamas. We will eliminate it a
A widely circulated clip of this speech—which appeared on the BBC, and in the *Ne*
York Times, the *Guardian*, and South Africa's ICJ case—dishonestly omitted the mid
sentence, making it look as if Gallant had pledged to eliminate "all of Gaza." Gallan
was also accused of calling Palestinians "human animals." He didn't—he was referr
to Hamas, the "ISIS of Gaza."

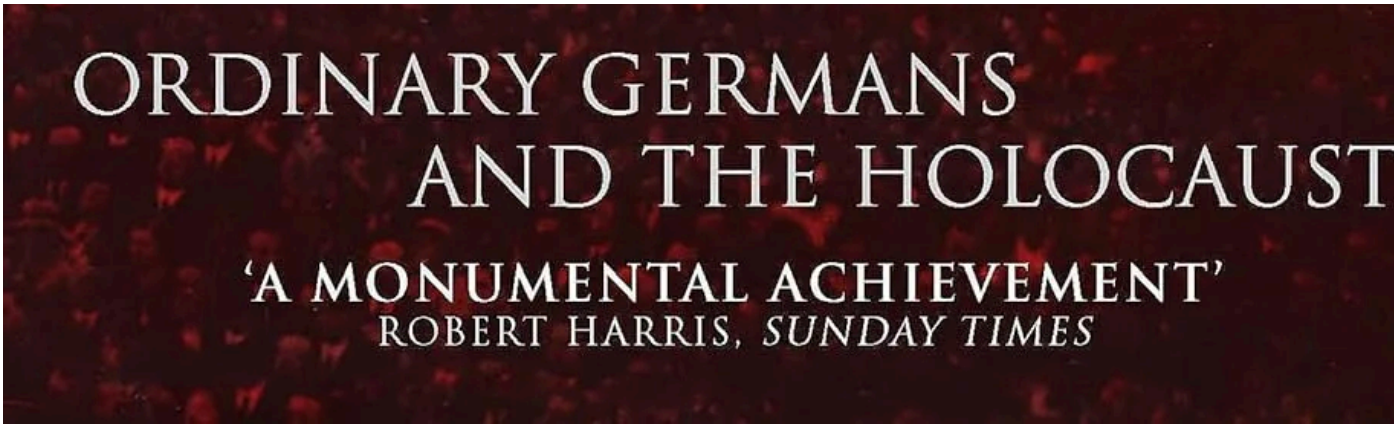


And Netanyahu never said that "Gazans would pay a huge price," as even once-
reputable scholars have claimed; he said Israel would "exact a huge price from the
enemy," meaning Hamas. Nor did he threaten to turn Gaza into a "desert island"—a
complete fabrication born of a mistranslation by Al Jazeera, which is funded by the
same regime that bankrolls Hamas.

And then there is Israeli president Isaac Herzog's assertion that "it's an entire natic
out there that is responsible. This rhetoric about civilians not aware, not involved. I
absolutely untrue. They could've risen up, they could have fought against that evil

regime.” Herzog’s phrasing was unfortunate and liable to be misunderstood, althou it should be noted that historians such as Daniel Goldhagen have made identical claims of collective responsibility about the German people under Nazi Germany.


Die Juden sind unser Unglü
Mädchen, die Juden sind Euer
DANIEL JONAH GOLDHAGEN
HITLER'S WILLING EXECUTIONERS



In any event, during the same speech Herzog went on to clarify that "there are man many innocent Palestinians" who will not be targeted by the IDF. He subsequently stated:

> For the State of Israel, and of course for me personally, innocent civilians are not considered targets in any way whatsoever. There are also innocent Palestinians i Gaza. I am deeply sorry for the tragedy they are going through. From the first da the war right until today, I have called and worked for humanitarian aid for them and only for them. This is part of our values as a country.

Needless to say, these remarks by Israel's president did not make it into South Afric ICJ case, or into any of the NGO reports. Nor did the endless stream of official statements in press conferences, IDF briefings, and social media posts from 8 Octo onwards reaffirming that Israel's "military operations in Gaza are solely directed at Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other armed groups," that the IDF "does not intentionall target civilians or seek to harm the civilian population," and that Israel "does everything possible to limit civilian casualties."

President Isaac Herzog at a press briefing, press briefing on Oct 12, 2023.

I can’t recall another instance of such arrant dishonesty making its way into serious reports and court filings—at least not from my own political camp. Every single rep regurgitates the same litany of misquoted, misinterpreted, or fabricated statements Israeli officials, sometimes just a few words strung together, as if they somehow constitute the equivalent of the Wannsee conference. To be sure, some Israeli figur did make abhorrent statements in the overheated wake of Hamas’s massacre, but th were people without military decision-making power, such as extremist rabbis, Knesset members, retired military officers, and media personalities (and Israel is arguably not doing enough to prosecute these people).

And though horrific, such statements are typical of the belligerent rhetoric in every war, a far cry from the explicit instructions and chain of command needed to establ actual genocidal intent. Even the hateful remarks by the far-right ministers of finan and national security, though reprehensible, do not come close to establishing genocidal intent, as these people did not have a seat in the war cabinet and do not

dictate military strategy. They are mostly extremist rabble-rousers riling up their political base.

II.

Leaving aside rhetoric and incitement, is there any evidence on the ground that the IDF acts with the intent to annihilate the entire Palestinian population, women and children included? I'm not a military expert, but as far as I can tell, there is none whatsoever. If the Gaza War was a genocide, it was the most incompetent genocide recorded history. Time and again, the IDF has warned the civilian population about impending attacks and offered them time to evacuate, by distributing millions of flyers, text messages, voice mails and QR codes with military maps—thereby suffering a clear military disadvantage (because Hamas fighters can also read a map). If your goal is to kill everyone, warning people beforehand where you will strike and giving them a chance to escape is about the stupidest thing you can do.

Despite temporary blockades, Israel has enabled the delivery of tens of thousands of trucks with food and medical supplies, organized humanitarian pauses and aid corridors, and even facilitated a polio vaccination campaign in the middle of the war. In the Spring of this year, Israel also set up its own aid delivery system through the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, distributing millions of meals to Gazans funded by Israeli taxpayers. It has used advanced AI technology to identify targets—Hamas operatives, tunnel entrances, weapon storages—and to assess the presence of civilians to determine the best timing for attacks. None of this makes even the slightest bit of sense if your goal is to exterminate the whole Palestinian population.

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